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ABSTRACT

Consideration is given to making the discussion of issues provided by the American Issues Forum most meaningful for students and applicable to their decision making about issues outside of the classroom. The Bicentennial and the American Issues Forum provide an excellent opportunity to help students develop a better understanding of our society's roots, values, and of the role and inevitability of conflict. A meaningful treatment of the issues raised by the founding of the nation and by the consideration of public policy since then must take into account the nature of values in a democratic society. Basic values of our society conflict with one another because contradictory values lie dormant within each of us. A classic dilemma is equality versus freedom: complete freedom leads to inequalities, and to achieve complete equality the freedom of some must be restricted. The issues in the Forum can be seen as the history of the continuing struggle over the appropriate mix of values in our nation's policies. The discussion of these issues can provide powerful insights for understanding the present and for deciding about the future. To deal adequately with issues in the past, students will need some of the inquiry skills of historians. Decisions about issues must be made in terms of frames of reference present at that time, not in terms of those of today, in order to provide a basis for understanding why certain decisions were made and how interpretations change. (Author/DE)

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THE BICENTENNIAL AND THE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC ISSUES*

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The Bicentennial Celebration is an exciting time for social studies teachers to reflect back on the origins of our Nation. Much controversy and debate led to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and to focus on public issues seems to be an especially appropriate way to celebrate the Bicentennial. The American Issues Forum provides one excellent vehicle for such a focus; but whatever the vehicle, there should be careful consideration of how to make the discussion of issues most meaningful for our students and applicable to their decision-making about issues outside of the classroom.

Note, for example, that the listing of "issues" in the Forum is actually a listing of topics--"A Nation of Nations", "The Land of Plenty", "Working in America", and so on. Teachers using the Forum, or similar programs, will have to be careful that consideration of these topics does not turn into an historical survey, focused on questions such as, "Who were the founding peoples?" "Why did immigrants come to this country?", rather than on issues--that is, matters or points of dispute.

In fact, major public issues tend to revolve around questions of what should be, questions of proper aims and actions--or ethical questions. This was the case as the Founding Fathers debated whether a new nation should be founded, independent of motherland England, and still is the case as we debate such questions as, "What should be done to insure economic and social equality for ethnic minorities?" These are the type of

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questions that continue to confront our nation and to challenge our decision-making capabilities and processes.

The Role of Values. A meaningful treatment of the issues raised by the founding of the new Nation and by the consideration of public policy since then must take into account the nature of values in a democratic society. Perhaps the most important starting point is to recognize the basic values of our society--those principles and standards of worth essential to the enhancement and preservation of human dignity, which is the central business of a democracy. Such values are referred to, at least implicitly, in the American Issues Forum Calendar: "Certain Unalienable Rights", "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness", "A More Perfect Union". They were used in the early debates--as in the Federalist Papers--and have been used in political discussion and analysis since. Many of them can be found in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution: consent of the governed, freedom of speech, due process, equal protection of the law, to name a few. They constitute what Gunnar Myrdal (in An American Dilemma) and others have referred to as the American Creed--a basic set of values to which Americans are emotively committed and which provide the context and the common commitment necessary for national debate, as well as the cement which holds our incredibly diverse nation together.

Of course, these basic values, and the ideals based on them, have not always been fulfilled in our nation's history. Indeed, if they had been, there would be no American Issues Forum. The pessimism, even cynicism, of youth and minority groups is often based on the perceived and real lack of fulfillment, and on the mistaken belief that the basic values of a democracy can or should be totally achieved.

Gunnar Myrdal chose the title, An American Dilemma, for his study of the black minority in America to refer to what he saw as a matter of conscience for Americans--the conflict between the basic values of the society, to which each of us tends to be committed, and our more specific values. Employers, in deciding what jobs to hire blacks for, were often faced with a conflict, for example, between their commitment to equality of opportunity and their desire for the approbation of their neighbors.

But Myrdal's analysis did not go far enough. The fact of the matter is that the basic values of our society conflict with one another, and these conflicts lie dormant within each of us because we are committed to contradictory values. A classic dilemma is equality versus freedom: Complete freedom leads to inequalities, and to achieve complete equality, the freedom of some must be restricted. As another example, the freedom of speech of some must on occasion be restricted in order to avoid extreme violations of the right of others to domestic tranquility (or order).

The conflicts are interpersonal as people debate over how the basic values should be interpreted (Does freedom of speech imply the right to use "obscene" language?) and how they should be applied to public issues (Should an open housing law be passed to enhance equality of opportunity at the expense of freedom of association and property rights?). But it is important to remember that the conflicts are intrapersonal as well, and that conflicts between the values are inherent and inevitable.

So, the problem for a democratic society is not how to attain all of our basic values perfectly--that is impossible--but what mix or blend of the values is desirable to most enhance human dignity at any particular time. The civil rights movement, for example, reminded America that many citizens were being denied equality, and that there needed to be a

redress of an imbalance between freedom for the dominant white group and equality for minority groups. Protests against the Vietamese War and against fighting in it brought about a shift in the relative emphasis on the values of individual conscience and national security.

In one sense, the issues in the Forum can be seen as one history of the continuing struggle over the appropriate mix of values in our nation's policies, and the discussion of them can provide powerful insights for understanding the present and for deciding about the future. But perhaps most important of all, learning to see issues from a context of inevitable conflict over the proper blend of values can be a powerful antidote to cynicism based on unrealistic expectations. And, entering the fray to influence the making of policy in line with those values which the individual thinks need emphasis now in our society should be encouraged.

More than Values. Of course, the analysis of public issues involves more than dealing with value conflicts. Students must be helped to understand what the issues are, to explore what has happened in the past to create the issues, and to weigh the implications for what they think should be done in the future. Concepts and skills for language analysis--words are the basis of thought and communication, and semantic effects are far reaching--and for verifying factual claims are essential. To deal adequately with issues in the past, students will need some of the inquiry skills of historians to evaluate evidence about what did happen. But care must be taken that the process does not become the teaching history for history's sake, or of historians' skills without consideration of their relevance to dealing with the issues.

A powerful concept to be taught students is that of frame of reference: The notion that each of us has a set of beliefs--about what has

been, is, will be, can be, and should be--that are an outgrowth of our experiences and that influence how we think and what we do. Charles Beard utilized this idea in his Economic Interpretation of the Constitution, in which he suggested that the Constitution was designed to protect certain economic interests because the writers were influenced, often unconsciously, by their particular frames of reference. In our pluralistic society, differences in frames growing out of diversity in experiences are the root of controversy, including disagreement over the values to be emphasized in decisions. This is an important understanding for dealing with the issues currently facing our country, but it is also an essential basis for discussing historical issues in a proper context.

Decisions about issues are made in terms of frames of reference present at that time, not in terms of those of today, and the decisions should be considered in that light. This should not be taken as a relativistic argument that whatever was decided was right (for example, slavery is not a justifiable practice), but as a basis for understanding why certain decisions were made and for being aware that interpretations and emphases of the basic values do change as circumstances change. The overall focus should be on shedding light on the issues that confront us today and that will need to be faced in the future.

A Final Word. The Bicentennial and the American Issues Forum provide an excellent opportunity to help students develop a better understanding of our society's roots and its values, and of the role and inevitability of conflict. Grappling with historic and current public issues can be a fruitful way of helping students to understand and appreciate the magnitude of the intelligence, creativity, and courage of our Founding Fathers: to understand and appreciate the nature of the system of basic

values of our democratic society, with its inherent conflict and tough choices, within which we struggle to define human dignity; and to approach the future with some optimism based on awareness of a less-than-perfect, yet somewhat miraculous political system which provides the means for continuously searching for that blend of values which will best enhance human worth and dignity for their time.